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EAST TIMOR'S STRUGGLE

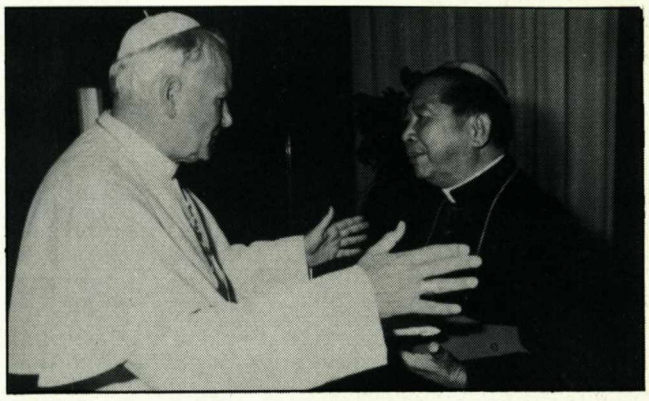
The Church responds

In 1981 religious orders in East Timor confessed they 'felt stunned by the silence of the international Church which seemed to allow us to die deserted'.
Sections of the Church have since heard their cry for help.
Some of their responses can be found in these pages.
A much greater effort is required from the Churches, however, if the predominantly Christian East Timorese are to realise their dream of self-determination like other colonial peoples.

Pope pleads for East Timorese

'The Holy See continues to follow the situation in East Timor with preoccupation and with the hope that particular consideration will be given in every circumstance to the ethnic, religious and cultural identity of the people . . . You know the many efforts the Holy See has made to contribute to helping the people of that area and how it earnestly recommends respect for human rights.'

John Paul II, 7 July 1984



The former head of the Catholic in East Timor, ***Mgr. da Costa Lopes,*** *is received by* ***Pope John Paul II***

Timorese clergy: solidarity with the martyred people.

'We the priests of East Timor know the suffering and anxieties of our people and witness hopelessly the whole process of annihilation presented under the guise of truth and we foresee the implacable extermination of the people.'

Timorese clergy, 13 May 1983

'Despite all the forces against us, we continue to hold and disseminate that the only solution to the East Timor conflict is a political and displomatic one, and that this should include the right of a people to self-determination . . . We also want the words of Pope John Paul to be put into practice. As long as this is not implemented there will not be a peaceful solution for East Timor.'

Mgr. Belo, 5 December 1984

'Any act of war aimed indiscriminately at extensive areas along with an entire population is a crime against God and against humanity itself. It merits unequivocal and unhesitating condemnation.' — ***Vatican II***

Under cover of darkness

It is now 10 years since Indonesia invaded the former Portuguese colony of East Timor in 1975. In that time over 100,000 East Timorese, one in six of the population, have died as a result of military activity and associated factors.

Yet despite this length of time and the scale of devastation, many are still not aware of the basic story. The reason is simple. Indonesia has been able to keep the general public in the dark by denying unrestricted access to independent observers thereby keeping the grim reality of what has happened off TV screens and out of the newspapers. At the same time Jakarta has pursued a vigorous propaganda campaign designed to convince the world that the East Timorese are happy and prospering and that resistance is minimal to non-existent. And Western Governments have promoted this perception in the interests of good relations with the pro-Western Suharto Government.

The real story

The Church in East Timor tells a very different story. Its close contact with the people through its network of mission stations has kept it well informed and well placed to monitor the effects of the Indonesian occupation on the people. 50% of the population is Catholic.

Thus in September 1981 Catholic Religious gave this blunt overview of what Indonesia has presented as an act of liberation. 'Since the invasion what the people have experienced is war, looting, destruction of the indigenous population, territorial subjection, colonial exploitation, the expulsion of an indigenous population who are replaced by people from other islands, military occupation, attempts at mass mobilisation of ordinary citizens to make war on each other . . .'

Intensive military activity resumed in 1983 after a brief ceasefire. 'Last 1983', wrote Mgr Belo in December 1984 to the French Church, 'the military started once more their mop-up operations to exterminate the remaining forces of Fretilin. Up to now there has not been any victory on either side'.

Renewed abuses of human rights inevitably accompany such campaigns. 'In many places there are violations of human rights, assassinations and cases of arrest and imprisonment without trial of anyone suspected of having links with Fretilin. The families of the prisoners are in bad condition', Mgr Belo told the Age in July last year. Some 3000 Timorese are being held as political prisoners, most of them on the small island of Atauro off Dili.

The effects of the war are widely felt. 'The numbers of orphans, widows and areas where there is extreme lack of food and medication is also on the increase', Mgr Belo informed the French Church. Heavier restrictions are clamped on the hundreds of resettlement centres into which the bulk of the tribal people have been moved lest villagers pass on medicine and other assistance to the resistance.

Development . . . but for Indonesia

The Church concedes that Jakarta has invested heavily in development projects, particularly since 1980. But 'it is the military who organise everything', said a religious superior in 1982. 'The Timorese civilian leaders stand like statues unable to do anything or say anything against what the military are doing . . . The Government is building houses and roads and schools, but the people cannot feel this is helping them. They do not feel they are consulted as to what should be done for their area.' Alienation is a common theme of Church assessments. 'The development program has not satisfied the Timorese. It has not made them happy. They feel it is not for them, but for Indonesia', said Mgr Belo last year.

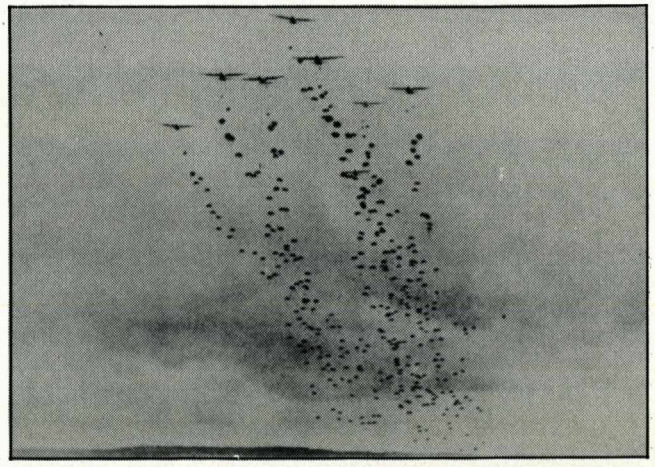
Cultural genocide

War and repression have created widespread physical suffering and trauma and have been repeatedly condemned by the Church. What preoccupies the Church more and more, however, is the more subtle and long term destructive impact of the Indonesianisation program being carried out through the influx of Indonesian transmigrants, the teaching of Indonesian language and culture in the many schools, the acculturation of the young in Indonesian universities in Java, the massive resettlement of tribal people. 'There is a Timorese culture', asserts a recent Church statement, 'made up of words, attitudes, reactions, behaviour, ways of being and seeing the world . . . The attempt to Indonesianise the Timorese people through powerful Pancasila (Indonesian state ideology) campaigns, schooling and media, by divorcing the people from their own weltanschauung, represents a slow assassination of Timorese culture. To kill their culture is to kill the people themselves.'

The people never smile

Continuing Timorese antipathy towards Indonesia is hardly surprising therefore. The New Zealand journalist, Martyn Bates, who visited East Timor in March 1983 concluded the majority of East Timorese were engaged in what he termed 'cold war' with their Indonesian masters. Both he and Portuguese journalists who visited at the same time were struck by the heavy atmosphere of fear pervading Timor. 'Most of the people are afraid . . . most of them keep silent', the then head of the Catholic Church, Mgr Lopes, told Bates.

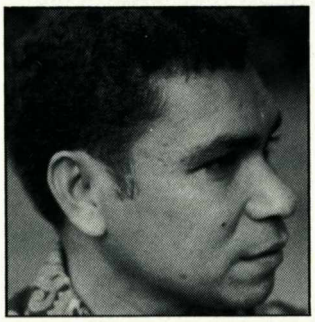
This continues today. A West German MP who visited the territory early in 1985 concluded 'the overall impression throughout the entire island is of a place in captivity. The people never smile . . . Here in East Timor, the people look stern, bitter, hostile and numb'.



Indonesian commandos parachuting into ***Baucau*** *during the 1981 offensive. Three years earlier in 1978,* ***General Dading,*** *the Indonesian commander for East Timor, had flatly asserted 'the whole thing will be over by the end of this year. . .'*

Timorese Church seeks justice

Mgr. Martinho da Costa Lopes



***Mgr. Carlos Felipe Ximenes Belo,** 37, appointed head of the Catholic Church in East Timor by the Vatican, May 1983.*
***'I am ready to be removed if that is the price of defending human rights and the rights of the Timorese. The truth should be published',** said the Mgr, in July 1984.*

Self-determination

'There is a special and profound respect for the Church. Everything the people know they tell to priests. The East Timor Church has listened intently for the nearly nine years since the Indonesian invasion.

In the absence of genuine self-determination and independence, the war and misery in East Timor will continue indefinitely. We in the Church know that the resistance of the East Timorese people continues on all levels — in their hearts and souls, in their prayers to God'.

Mgr da Costa Lopes, 12 June 1984

Material aid not enough

'It would be a tragic and cynical illusion to believe that humanitarian aid and material things alone could resolve the question of East Timor . . . No material goods can ever compensate for the denial of self-determination and independence, for the unending bloodshed and violence.'

Mgr da Costa Lopes to the American bishops, 12 June 1984

'I cannot understand why some nations willingly sacrifice the right of self-determination of East Timor in exchange for commerce.'

Mgr da Costa Lopes, 21 February 1984

A Diplomatic solution

'Despite all the forces against us, we continue to hold and disseminate that the only solution to the East Timor conflict is a political and displomatic one and this should include, above all, the respect for the right of a people to self-determination'.

Mgr. Belo, 5 December 1984

Indonesian withdrawal and negotiations

'If Indonesia is determined to colonise East Timor by force, things will become more difficult. There will be more resistance from the Timorese . . . The best way to restore peace and protect the rights of the people is for a cease-fire to be declared, Indonesian military reinforcements withdrawn and negotiations resumed between Fretilin and the provincial administration'.

Mgr. Belo, 16 July 1984.

CHURCH STATEMENTS OF SUPPORT

Indonesian Bishops

'The Catholic Church in Indonesia, inspite of all restrictions has made every possible effort to express its solidarity and friendship with the Faithful and the people of East Timor who are being deluged by most bitter trials both physically and spiritually.

We struggle so that with respect for all persons and with urgent haste we may attain first and foremost: a return to peace for all those who are now at war. We struggle through various ways to enforce acknowledgement and respect for those things which are considered most sacred by the people of East Timor: their religion, their family and their land.'

Jakarta. 17 November 1983

Portuguese Bishops

'The Portuguese Episcopate cannot help but manifest in a public document its living and deep solidarity with the people of this martyred country, victim of a tragedy which started nearly nine years ago and which unfrotunately continues until now.

It would be an illusion to think that behind the sad events that have developed in East Timor, there is no strongly felt awareness of a national identity which refuses to be repressed or annihilated.

Timor aspires to the full expression of its own individuality and to hinder it signifies not only a physical genocide, but also we can say a 'cultural' genocide, this latter one being more grave because it affects as much the people who are dying as those who survive, and not the present generations but also those of the future.

The Church can and should make its voice heard so that the injustices suffered by the Timorese people will cease and that the Timorese people can, by themselves, in peace and in liberty, determine their own future.'

Lisbon, 12 March 1984

Christian Conference of Asia Youth Assembly

This Assembly adopted a resolution expressing 'solidarity with the Church and the People of East Timor in their struggle for peace and justice.' The resolution called for a cease-fire, the withdrawal of Indonesian armed forces, dialogue with all parties, and a 'political settlement to uphold the right of the East Timorese to self-determination'.

New Delhi, 10 October 1984
A similar resolution was adopted by a CCA sponsored peace conference held in Japan, February 1985.

Anglican Synod

The Melbourne Diocese adopted a resolution affirming 'the right of the East Timorese people to a genuine act of self-determination' and requesting that 'the Australian Government should uphold this right in all future UN deliberations'.

September 1983

Australian Orders

'We write to you as a neighbouring Church . . . in response to your repeated calls . . . to recognise your struggles for justice and a peaceful resolution . . . We cannot condone any attempt to resolve the disenchantment and oppression of the people of East Timor through the exercise of military power, dislocation and harassment'.

National Council of Religious Superiors.
July 1984

Catholic Institute for International Relations

'The Indonesian Government must recognise, after a decade of repression which has not quelled opposition to its rule, that no political settlement for East Timor will be workable if it does not command the assent of the people of the territory . . '

Comment, March 1985

Belgian Church centre

'To be the voice of, and to stand up for, the genuine rights of its people is a heavy burden for the Church in East Timor. To carry on she needs not only sympathy but real support from the sister Churches all over the world, not only to alleviate the suffering of her people but to stand up for the internationally recognized right of self-determination.'

Pro Mundi Vita Dossier, 1984

CHURCH STATEMENTS

Catholic lay organisations

'East Timor is one of the most tragic and solitary exceptions in recent history to the provision in international human rights Agreements that peoples have the right to freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.' *Pax Romana, Geneva, 15 February 1985*

'The moment has come for the international community to intervene before it is too late. This conflict cannot be resolved by armed force but only by negotiations around the conference table in which all parties, including Fretilin, are involved.'
Pax Christi, Geneva, 15 February 1985

Japanese Catholic Council for Justice and Peace

'Out of Christian concern for our suffering brothers and sisters in East Timor, we wish to plead with Your Excellency to do all in your power to carry out the mandate in your new constitution to make every effort to work for the realization of self-determination for the East Timorese who, despite annexation and invasion by Indonesia, continue to struggle for their independence and for the survival of their culture
Letter to Portuguese Prime Minister, 19 June 1984

Australian Catholic Relief

ACR was one of the first agencies to respond to appeals for help from the East Timorese Church after the Indonesian invasion. Since 1975 it has contributed $434,000 to the relief and rehabilitation programmes of the Timorese Church.

Dutch Church agency

'Integration (with Indonesia) is not in conformity with the will of the majority of the Timorese people . . . The resistance has a far broader social basis than the Indonesian authorities would have us believe.'
Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace, April, 1984

Australian Catholic Commission for Justice and Peace

In a submission to the Australian Senate, ACCJP called for 'a genuine act of self-determination' in the long term, and in the short and medium term, 'social and cultural autonomy', humanitarian aid, family reunion and access for independent observers.
29 March 1982

What others are doing

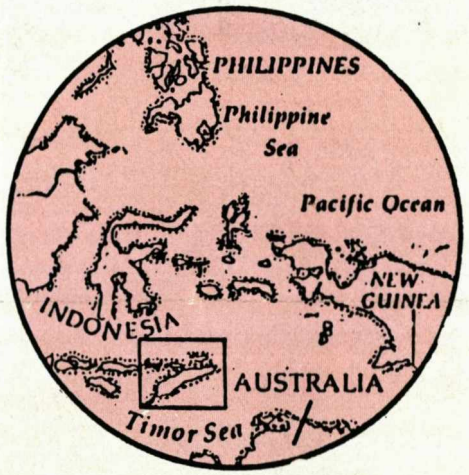
One model for a local initiative

In 1982, in Melbourne Australia, a group of Christians from various churches set up an East Timor support group in response to appeals for international solidarity from the Church in Timor. Called ***Christians in Solidarity with East Timor,*** the group meets once a month, shares information and parcels out a variety of tasks to its members. Its twelve members keep a larger network of 200 individuals and groups informed via a small newsletter. CISET's four point program comprises:

- the promotion of open communication between the Timorese Church and the International Church;
- the promotion in the churches of a better understanding of the situation in East Timor and the issues surrounding it;
- encouragement of the formulation of policy on East Timor by official bodies within the churches;
- upholding the fundamental rights of the East Timorese people.

In pursuit of these aims the group has held seminars for Church people, circulated petitions, organised prayer vigils, participated in peace marches, written brief articles for church media, spoken to church groups, assisted church bodies with the formulation of policies on Timor, written regularly to Government Ministers and MPs.

Address: CISET, PO Box 1092, North Fitzroy 3068, Australia.



Newsletters

Timor Link *Available: CIIR, 22 Coleman Fields, London N1 7AF, U.K.*

East Timor Report. Available ACFOA, 183 Gertrude St., Fitzroy 3065, Australia.

What you can do

Talk to others and circulate information with special reference to what the East Timorese are saying.

Inform your local clergy, church leaders, church organisations, and MPs and ask for their support.

Set up a group like CISET and enlist the support of similar interest groups.

Encourage church organisations and conferences to adopt strong resolutions on East Timor and convey these to the Government and media.

Send statements of support to the East Timor Church, addressed to Mgr. Belo, c/-Papal Nuncio, J1. Merdeka Timur 18, Jakarta Pusat, Indonesia.

Example of a conference resolution on East Timor

This conference: SHARES the deep concern of the worldwide Christian community at the continuing suffering, violence and abuse of human rights in East Timor;
EXPRESSES its solidarity with the Church and people of East Timor in their struggle for peace and justice;
JOINS with the head of the East Timor Church, Mgr. Belo, in calling for a cease-fire, the withdrawal of the Indonesian armed forces and a dialogue between Indonesia and the Fretilin-led resistance;
URGES the United Nations Secretary-General and the Portuguese Government, in their efforts to achieve a just and lasting settlement of the conflict, to insist that the East Timorese people, including Fretilin, be fully involved in all negotiations on the basis of their UN-recognised right to self-determination.

For further information, additional copies of this pamphlet, and regular contact, write to:
CISET, *PO Box 1092, North Fitzroy 3068, Australia.*

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